

Opera on CD

Ann Hallenberg—Farinelli

Arias and extracts from *Artaserse*, *Idaspe* (Broschi), *Adriano in Siria* (Giacomelli), *Semiramide riconosciuta*, *Polifemo* (Porpora), *Catone in Utica* (Leo), *Alcina*, *Rinaldo* (Handel), *Cleofide* (Hasse). With Les Talens Lyriques, c. Christophe Rousset. Aparte AP117 (one CD)

DISC OF
THE MONTH

While the last 50 years or so have seen huge strides in the revival of the repertoire and performance practice of early music, when it comes to opera compromise rules. In the case of the castrato, necessarily so. But in the case of matters such as the extemporization of ornamentation it is simply that the musical education in conservatoires does not today cover such a discipline. The results of such invention were doubtless at times vulgar. Yet in the hands of real artists, above all in the person of such quasi-mythical figures as the great castratos, the results must have been sensational, creating a unique symbiosis between singer and audience that is today lost. In the case of Carlo Broschi (aka Farinelli) we have not only ample contemporary evidence but also a copy of Farinelli's incredible ornamentation of his brother Riccardo's *aria di tempesta* 'Son qual nave' (from *Artaserse*), preserved in Vienna.

There is no falsettist today capable of adequately tackling Farinelli's roles, given the enormous range required, and even more the strength needed for rounded tone and volume in the middle and lower registers. Cue mezzos. We had a fine Farinelli CD from Vivica Genaux back in 2002; now Ann Hallenberg, a singer even better equipped to tackle this repertoire, enters the list. Unlike Genaux, Hallenberg includes the supremely testing 'Son qual nave', though wisely not Farinelli's ornamentation. Here *passaggi* are articulated with glittering accuracy, ornaments (including trills) are executed with a natural spontaneity, the

wide gamut is encompassed with equal comfort across the range, and chest notes are projected with real strength. Yet for me even more impressive is 'Ombra fedele' from Riccardo Broschi's *Idaspe* (Venice, 1730), a total contrast. Like 'Son qual nave', this hauntingly lovely aria reveals Broschi as an outstanding composer. Listen to the way he sets the words 'Che tanto adore', with the stress on 'tanto' (so)—Hallenberg imbues the phrase, slightly varied each time, with heartbreaking longing. This is great singing and great interpretation. And so it continues, the programme veering between celebration of the sheer liquid beauty of Hallenberg's tone and the exhilaration of the virtuoso arias.

The disc culminates in Hallenberg and Rousset attempting to demonstrate Farinelli's well-documented ability to articulate accurately at astoundingly high speeds in 'In braccio' from Porpora's



Semiramide riconosciuta. It should be added at this point that Rousset and Les Talens Lyriques provide top-notch support throughout.

Readers who know their Farinelli repertoire will have noted the inclusion of arias from Handel's *Alcina* and *Rinaldo*, operas that of course have no connection with the great castrato. The

reason for their inclusion is that they were sung as encores at the end of the programme, the CD being taken from a concert given at the Bergen International Festival in 2011. I don't know why we've been deprived of this glorious disc for so long, but its belated arrival can be greeted with ringing endorsement.

BRIAN ROBINS